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Neighbors

Cover Page Footnote

Art: Mother Stands for Comfort by Megan Green

Neighbors

by Heidi Hackford *

Edith Krebs and Dorothy Braymer had been neighbors for nearly fifty-three years and hadn't spoken in about that long. Edith told Raymond, her husband, that it was because Dotty Braymer was an ill-bred, fat, lazy gossip. Dotty told her husband, Bernie, that it was all Edith Krebs' fault--the stuck-up, bad-tempered stick. One day in the summer of '47, when both men were out back cleaning their garages, Raymond and Bernie put their heads together. They managed to pin the falling-out to a few days after the Krebses had moved in next door to the Braymers, eight years before. After an hour of painful speculation they concluded, with an unprecedented flash of intuition, that due to a wide divergence of personality and viewpoint, their wives would never get along.

The day after the moving van vacated the Krebses' rutted driveway, Dotty had squished through the mud of their front yard with a homemade carrot cake and the latest *Eyes On The Stars* magazine. She thought she and the new neighbor could have a nice cozy get-acquainted chat over coffee and cake and talk about what was going on in Hollywood. She hoped they would be good friends right off, seeing that there wasn't anyone else on the street yet. She didn't think that the new neighbor would mind that she had her hair in curlers; it was so lank there was really no point in taking the curlers out until right before Bernie got home.

Dotty climbed the steps to the side door, banged on the screen, and hollered a friendly Yoo-Hoo. Edith, who had been up since dawn unpacking and cleaning, was indulging in a few tears--the first of four times she would cry in her adult life. She was tired and frustrated and lonely. She had felt an irrepressible urge to cry, so she had sat herself on the bottom step of the staircase, folded her hands tightly together, and readied herself for some controlled weeping. The second tear was squeezing out of the corner of her left eye and the first was melting in the ridge by her nose when she heard a God-awful howling emanating from the kitchen. Then she heard the sound of a box full of something breakable doing just that on the kitchen floor. A minute later a horror with muddy feet, a wrinkled pink housedress, and a head full of curlers that made her look as if she had horns stepped into the room, gaudy red mouth pursed into an "O" of shocked apology.

"Honey, I am so sorry! These big feet of mine just tangled me all up and I grabbed at what I could. Don't worry, I'm good for whatever's broke. You don't... Hey, have you been crying? Why, you *have*, I can see, I'm real good at telling those things!" Dotty rushed forward, squinting at her neighbor's face, her brow crinkled in sympathy. She clucked vague comfort noises and folded Edith's skinny body in an awkward embrace.

Edith felt her teeth crush together as her jaw tightened. Her face flattened against a too-soft bosom that smelled of bacon and cheap perfume. A button poked her in the eye. She could not breathe, speak, or move.

All the while, Dotty was rambling on, anxious to dispel any and all possible apprehensions the new neighbor might be having. "Bernie told me

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you're just barely married. Don't worry, it isn't all that bad. I've been married a year-and-a-half and I cried every night for the first two months, I was so lonely and scared. Bernie thought I had the fits. But it'll pass, and there are some, what do you call them, 'compensations'." She loosened her grip long enough to impart a lewd grin and suddenly realized that the neighbor's body was straining away from her in silent desperation. When Edith finally succeeded in releasing herself, she stood up and gripped the railing. She was breathing heavily. There were two scarlet splotches of color on her cheeks. It occurred to Dotty with astonishment that her new neighbor was angry.

"How dare you!" Edith choked, her eyes narrowed. "Who are you? Coming in here dragging mud all over my clean floor like a big fat snail. Breaking my things! I don't want to talk to *you*."

Dotty bent down and wiped at the trail of dirt with the hem of her dress. She could hardly see for the sudden tears in her eyes. Dotty was sensitive about her weight problem. She couldn't help it, after all; it was a hereditary thing. "I'm sorry, I did make a mess," she mumbled.

"Oh, leave it. Now I've got to do it all over again," Edith snapped. She made a quick gesture of annoyance that Dotty felt rather than saw.

Dotty straightened and held out the carrot cake. "I made you this as a housewarming," she said. She didn't feel like crying anymore; she was angry.

They looked each other in the eye.

With the absolute, inevitable, and inescapable certainty of love at first sight, Dorothy Braymer and Edith Krebs knew that they hated one another. Dotty set the cake on the bottom step, turned on her heel, and followed the mud trail out of the room and out of the house. Edith crinkled her nose with disgust and shook her head at the dirt. She carried the cake into the kitchen, threw it into the trash, and began to refill the mop bucket.

After that first meeting, Dotty and Edith only saw each other out-of-doors--or peeking

through closed curtains--but neither would admit to that. Very soon, it was apparent that Edith had a compulsive desire to keep her yard and flower beds as immaculate as the inside of her house. Dotty told her husband nastily that of course Edith Krebs couldn't just enjoy the sunshine and the fresh air like other people. No, *she* had to do something productive to make it all right for her to be outside. Being outside for the sheer enjoyment of it just *had* to be wrong. Bernie "umhummed" noncommittally. It did not occur to him to wonder how his wife had gotten such a handle on her neighbor's character, considering they never spoke.

Dotty felt that the arena of battle necessarily had to extend to the outdoors; as long as Edith was out there, Dotty made it a practice to be out-of-doors, too. She took to wandering outside around ten-thirty or eleven o'clock in the morning when she got up, still in her housecoat and curlers. She brought her coffee and a magazine out to the porch and settled herself on a chaise lounge under the green and white striped awning she *knew* Edith secretly coveted.

Edith usually got outside around the same time as Dotty, after she had cleaned the house and planned dinner. She would come around the corner of the house from the garage with a bright green gardening bucket filled with sparkling tools, her freshly-laundered gardening gloves and a floppy shade hat that Dotty thought looked like a squashed mushroom. Edith always had the self-righteous look of the early riser when confronted by someone who is not a 'morning person'.

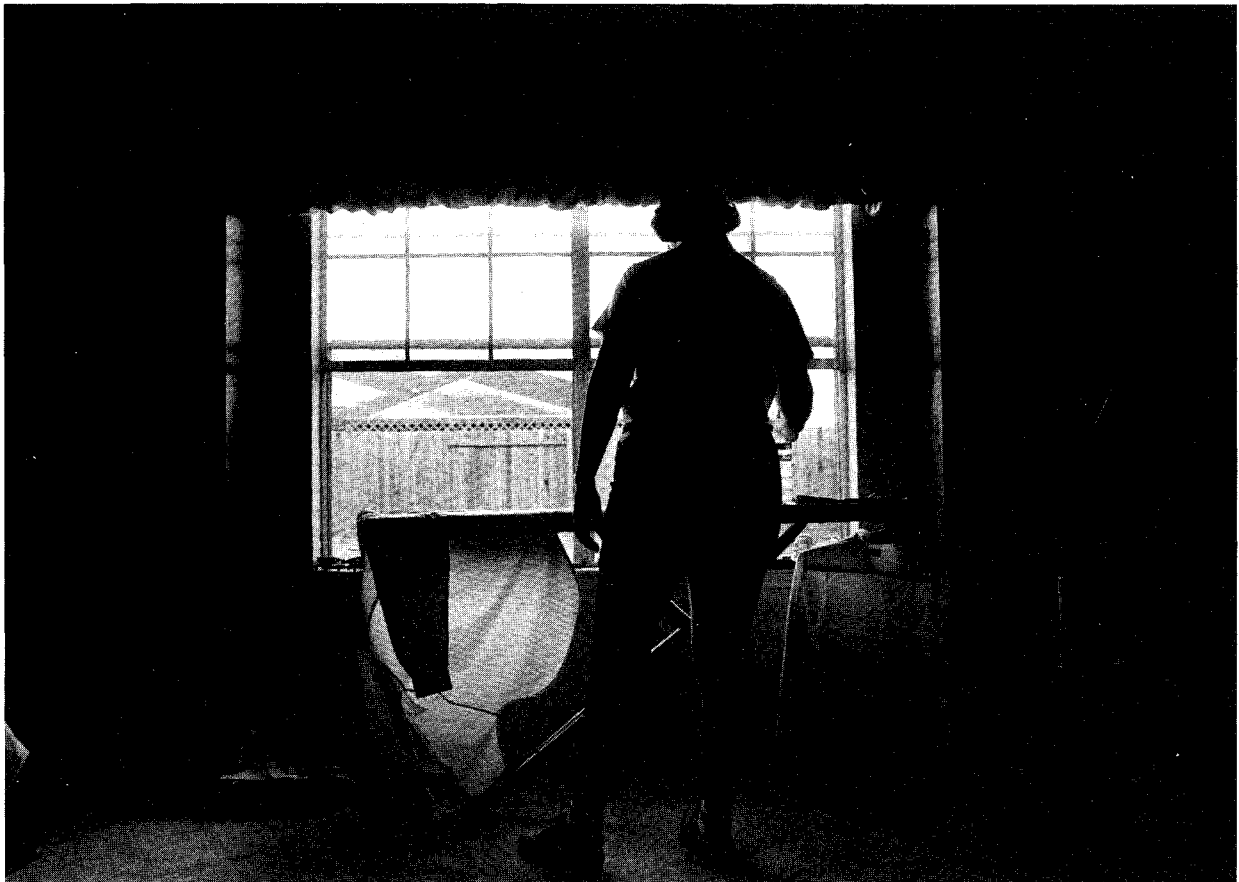
Dotty would wait until Edith settled into the chosen job of the morning--weeding, seeding, or tying up plants--and then she'd read aloud juicy snippets from her magazine. She waited until she saw Edith's back stiffen and knew she must be listening before she let her voice trail off right before the good part. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! I didn't know Cary Grant...ummmmm..." She grinned slyly when Edith ruthlessly attacked a weed with her clippers or stabbed her trowel into the ground with murderous force.

In the summer, Edith's lawn resembled a

green carpet, shorn down to manageable height, unflawed by leaves, sticks, or other natural debris. As boys, Frankie Braymer and Ronald Krebs, who were best friends despite their mothers' hostility, were not allowed to play on the Krebses' front lawn. In the summer of '48, the boys dug up Edith's front yard to make tiger traps for Booger Drake, the bully up the street. They planned to taunt him with insults until he was provoked to chase after them across the lawn, where they had prepared eight well-placed, two-foot-deep holes carefully covered with thin sticks and sod. The plan was that they would easily gain the safety of the Braymers' front porch, as they had memorized the location of all the pits. Ideally, Booger would trip in a hole and break his neck, but they were willing to settle for a broken ankle.

Unfortunately, Frankie and Ronald had overestimated their own speed as well as underestimated both Booger's speed and his bad temper. They arrived home in tears with black eyes and bloody noses. That was the second time that Edith cried. Dotty didn't know whether Edith's tears were out of sympathy for her son or anger at the wreck of her beautiful lawn.

In 1952, Bernie's brother Walt brought Dotty the fountain from the Gardenia Ballroom of the old Palladian Hotel. Walt was foreman of the wrecking crew and had thought immediately of his brother's classy wife, whom he was sure would go in for that kind of elegant thing. The fountain was about six feet in diameter and made out of marble



Mother Stands for Comfort by Megan Green
photograph

too white to be marble. It had three tiers of scalloped pools with garlands of stony roses that were placed too abundantly for taste. The top tier sported a quartet of supercilious-looking swans facing North, South, East, and West. It had taken eight profusely-sweating men to move it into the back of Walt's pickup and eight more to unload it onto Dotty's side yard. During the move, the West swan, who now pointed towards the Krebses' side door, had lost its head and most of its neck. Dotty thought the fountain was the ugliest thing she had ever set eyes on, but she didn't want to hurt Walt, who was probably the second ugliest. Besides, she had seen the tears of anger in Edith's eyes when Anne McDonald across the street had innocently asked Edith if the fountain belonged to her. That was the third time that Edith Krebs cried.

It didn't take long for the birds to discover the fountain and pretty soon it became a gathering place for all the local flocks. Edith didn't think Dotty was aware that she would sneak over to clean the filthy thing every Wednesday afternoon when Dotty went to the supermarket. The fountain itself was bad enough, but dirty it could not be borne.

In the spring of 1956, Ronald Krebs beat his friend Frank Braymer in the quarter mile high hurdles to set a new school record. Edith lovingly tended her front flower beds. Dotty, on her front porch, read her magazines in silence.

In 1958, Gerald Krebs took Cindy Braymer to his senior prom. Edith laid out a brick path from the front door to the driveway that took her the better part of a week and gave her a chronic backache and two broken toes. Dotty read bits of articles with gusto.

In 1959, Ronald Krebs was killed in Korea. Edith edged the driveway with painful zeal. Dotty read snippets from her magazines and left in the good parts.

In 1964, Dotty lost Bernie to a nineteen-year-old check-out girl from the Kwik-E-Mart. Edith shoveled her driveway and

her walk. Then she shoveled Dotty's driveway and walk. Dotty watched from her living room window.

In 1991, Raymond Krebs had a stroke that left his right arm and leg paralyzed; he couldn't speak. Edith moved his bed downstairs to the dining room and nursed him at home. The only time she had to herself was when he napped in the morning and she went out to see to the yard. He died in August after spending six months as an invalid. He hadn't known who Edith was for the last three weeks.

Two days after the funeral, Dotty saw Edith come around the side of the house with a new lawnmower. It was a big, shiny, self-propelled Sears Lawnmaster that dragged Edith along behind it like a Great Dane out for a walk. Dotty was enjoying the fact that the lawnmower appeared to be getting the better of Edith, when she caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. A squirrel was sitting on the grass not five feet from Dotty's porch making a mess on Edith's lawn with a pile of nuts and sticks he was systematically tearing to shreds. Dotty watched with anticipation as Edith, rounding the far corner of the lawn, turned and saw him. The Lawnmaster bore down on the squirrel with startling speed. Edith only meant to scare him, but the squirrel was either stupid or diseased or paralyzed with fear, because he never moved and the mower went right over him with a sudden wet crunch. Edith shut off the Lawnmaster. There was a horrible mess on the lawn. For the first time since the day they met, she raised her head to stare Dotty in the eye. Dotty tried, not very hard, to suppress an involuntary grin of amused horror. Edith let out a blast of air through her nostrils and, frowning, turned back to the mower. But when Dotty began to giggle, and then to laugh her high-pitched old lady cackle, she could see Edith's thin bent shoulders twitching with silent, shared mirth.

That was three months ago. Today, Dotty sat watching as Edith's two remaining children and a daughter-in-law packed some of their mother's things into a van. The rest of her belongings were going to be sold at an auction next week. Edith was

being moved to Rosewood Rest Home so she wouldn't, as her children put it, "feel like she had to do so much work around the house and keep up the yard and all that." Dotty had heard them arguing with their mother last week; it had been warm and the windows were open.

Edith came slowly out of the house with her daughter, Marianne, who settled her in the passenger seat of the Caprice Estate station wagon parked at the curb. Marianne waved abstractedly to Dotty and hurried back into the house to help Gerald and his wife with the suitcases. The movers drove the van away.

Dotty could see Edith sitting all tight and frozen in the front seat. Edith was crying for the fourth and last time in her life. She had felt it coming on and was allowing a tear or two to squeeze out of her eyes before the kids came back. She didn't think Dotty Braymer could see her from her porch, where she sat like some obese bird of prey; Dotty had taken to wearing glasses ten or eleven years ago and she didn't have them on now.

But Edith through her tears, and Dotty without her glasses, both saw the squirrel in the big elm toss a half-gnawed stick down onto Edith's lawn.

After a few minutes Dotty put aside the magazine that had been sitting unopened on her lap for the

entire morning. She got up off of her chair--it had been years since she could get out of a chaise lounge without a crane--and carefully descended her porch steps. She crossed her driveway and set foot on the neighbor's lawn for the first time in fifty-three years or so. She waddled slowly to the fallen branch and crouched awkwardly down on one fat knee to pick it up. She could feel Edith Krebs watching her from the car. She heaved herself up, grunting, and pulled her flapping sweater closed with one hand. Then she crossed back to her yard, carrying the stick up onto the porch, where she collapsed back in her chair with a loud sigh.

A moment later, Edith's children came out of the house. They locked the door behind them and loaded four battered suitcases into the back of the station wagon. They waved to Dotty and she raised a hand and nodded. Then they got in the car and drove Edith off.

Dotty got her glasses out of their case and wiped them clean on the hem of her sweater. She picked up her *People* magazine. Michael Jackson was smirking on the cover; he had one skinny arm halfway around Liz Taylor. Dotty set the magazine back down. She looked over at the house next door and watched the leaves fall gently onto Edith Krebs' lawn.

